

Remembering the Victims: The Sarajevo Red Line Memorial and the Trauma Art Paradox

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Abstract

The Sarajevo Red Line venerates the dead through both a physical memorial and performance. The artistic choices made by Haris Pašović in creating the temporary memorial provide a way for both survivors and the world at large to unite in empathy, trying to come to terms with the tragedy, and assured that those who were forced to give the ultimate sacrifice would be remembered. The use of multiple mediums enhances the ability of an audience to connect, thus giving people an opportunity to relate to the tragedy whether it directly affected them or not. The seeming paradox inherent in the term trauma art is made more dramatic in memorials, but especially so in the Sarajevo Red Line. The overall idea of the Sarajevo Red Line is to commemorate the thousands of people (both adults and children) who lost their lives in the siege of Sarajevo that continued for nearly four years. That particular battle was bloody and tragic, yet the memorial itself is beautiful in both its simplicity and its complexity.

Keywords: Bosnian War, Memorials, Sarajevo Red Line, Haris Pašović

1. Introduction

Haris Pašović, Bosnian theater and film director, designed the *Sarajevo Red Line* as a temporary installation that would pay homage to the thousands of people, young and old, who died in Sarajevo, Bosnia's capital city. Red plastic chairs seem so simple, but 11,541 of them can be overwhelming. A stage full of performers also seems ordinary, but the fact that they are playing to a dead audience is anything but that. The overall audience of the entire memorial spans first and second generation as well as a world audience that may or may not have had a connection to the Bosnian War itself, yet really, the memorial was for a single generation of viewers. The *Sarajevo Red Line* was set up and taken down for a day, not a permanent installation to be visited and marveled at for the years to come.

The temporariness of the memorial leaves a bit of a conundrum- would its potency be lessened? Will one group of people be more affected than other due to its short duration? No other group of people will be able to experience it in person, but the images, video, and written accounts of it persist. Are those means of preserving the *Sarajevo Red Line* enough to ensure its ability to provide people with the opportunity to connect with and experience the installation days, weeks, months, or years after its dismantling. The short answer is yes. The immediate impact of the memorial affected not just those seeing it with their own eyes, in person, but those watching it through news coverage around the world. Videography has made it possible for people to see more realistically the things they cannot see in person, thus forever preserving the installation, in a way, making it permanent. While temporary memorial may not physically last forever, they do allow audiences opportunities for empathy well after their dismantling.

2. Memorials and Empathy

The research on the power and influence of memorials, especially ones created in the past few decades and those commemorating the Holocaust, is plentiful. Emotionally complicated, memorials take three 'people' into consideration: artist, audience, and subject. Of the three members of memorial installations, the audience is the most important as the overarching purpose of memorialization is to establish connections and provide the viewer with the opportunity to experience the subject of and empathize with the emotions of the subject of the memorial.

Memorialization has long been a means for society not only to pay respect to and remember various aspects of history, but also to invite an audience to do the same. The idea of a memorial is fluid and ever changing. In his 1994

essay, "Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age," Andreas Huyssen explains how memorials are no longer simply physical structures, but rather complex entities that will continue to change over time as cultures and technology evolve. James E. Young, professor and expert in Jewish studies, explains the variation in presentation form seen in memorials.

Pašović's connection to Sarajevo and the siege its years of suffering, compelled him to create the *Sarajevo Red Line*. A native Bosnian, he took the approach of the 20th anniversary of the beginning of the Siege of Sarajevo as a completely new venue for expressing his artistic abilities.

Pašović wrote a small essay about the *Sarajevo Red Line* in which he explains his choices and motivations in creating the temporary display. Primarily, Pašović explains that he focused on the victims, all 11,541 of them. He used numbers that had been released by the Research and Development Center, with statistics revealing the deaths of 643 children. [1]. Such a startling number unsettled Pašović so much that he could not simply let those men, women, and children pass out of this world without properly remembering them. Pašović conjectures, "they would have creatively contributed to this city and this country; they would have had celebrated their birthdays and New Years..." [1]. The war took away their lives and left their families in agony. After these people lost their lives, the lives of everyone in Sarajevo would never be the same. Pašović refuses to let these people simply pass away into oblivion: "Sarajevo has never paid a proper tribute to these silent heroes." [1]. In his mind, the city itself must come together to memorialize those lost; at the very least, they deserve some form of remembrance.

The *Sarajevo Red Line* pointedly captures the historic suffering of Sarajevo while simultaneously bringing beauty out of tragedy. The memorial combines visual and auditory senses to produce a large-scale commemoration: "*Sarajevo Red Line* is a drama and music poem... 11,541 red chairs arranged in 825 rows (as an audience). This red audience stretched for 800 meters..." [1]. The chairs were set in front of a stage and became the audience for a performance piece composed by Pašović. Since the thousands of dead Sarajevans could not go to the theater, Pašović brought it to them, after death. The empty chairs sat in silence as the performers offered their form of honor and praise. Alison Smale, *New York Times* journalist, describes Pašović's thoughts on the chairs in her article, "Honoring Sarajevo's Victims and Its Survivors": "It back to 1998. He was walking in downtown Sarajevo, he said, when he came across hundreds of young people chanting and dancing in anticipation of a rock concert... 'Somehow... I knew that these young people had survived although they—our enemies—did not want them to.'" [2]. The red chairs represented both blood shed, but also the vitality of youthful vigor that once spread across the city.

The performers and pieces were carefully chosen to provide a broad brushstroke of life in Sarajevo: "It was performed by Merima Ključo, one of the finest accordion players in the world, together with the Sarajevo classical music choir, Art Vivo led by Danijel Zontar, composer and choir's artistic director... The program also included school choirs made up of 750 students." [1]. The world and Bosnia's best performers, along with Bosnia's youth, came together to form a perfect mix that reflects the children and adults lost during the war. Pašović would accept nothing less for the martyrs of his beloved city: "A concert was held, mixing Bosnian folk song and modern Western rock music." [2]. The interweaving of the old and the new reflects the bittersweet occasion of remembering tragedy. Pašović masterfully created an overwhelming sadness felt by many watching the performance juxtaposed with a sense of hope for the future.

Pašović's main audience were the victims of the tragedy, but his memorial reached so many more people, those directly linked to the siege and those participating as part of a larger world audience. More than just the people in Bosnia were interested in the installation. In his explanation of the *Sarajevo Red Line*, he explains how momentous the installment was, given that its implications were far reaching; he describes cultural, historical, artistic, and social relevance.

In terms of cultural and historical importance, Pašović notes, "'Sarajevo Red Line' is a special project, one of those that mark the cultural history of a country. This project commemorates, in an artistic fashion, the human losses suffered by Sarajevo during the 1992-96 siege." [1]. The siege of Sarajevo was not just significant in Bosnia, but to the climate of the world in the late 20th century. The siege forever changed Bosnia- the country would never be able to go back to where it had been; the memories of the violence remain. Pašović shines artistically, striving to make Sarajevo Red Line completely unique and he accomplished just that: "This artistic happening is without precedence in the history of art. A concert dedicated to an audience of 11,541 killed persons has never been performed. 11,541 red chairs, arranged so that they create a red river—the Sarajevo Red Line—down the main street of Sarajevo is a highly aesthetic and dramatic visual installation." [1]. The vivid red sea of chairs is stark and stirring, demanding visual attention while the idea of performing a concert to the dead had never been breached on such a scale before Pašović attempted it.

The social importance, though simple, is direct: "This city needs to stop for a moment and pay tribute to its killed citizens since it has never happened that all the 11,541 killed citizens of Sarajevo were commemorated together in such a manner." [1]. The message of social responsibility bleeds from Pašović's memorial; he needs his living audience to

acknowledge its loss. Pašović nearly deems it a civic duty for the current citizens of Sarajevo to mark the anniversary of the beginning of the siege in a unique and powerful way.

The *Sarajevo Red Line* is a strong example of Andreas Huyssen's conjectures about the evolution of memorials. Huyssen explains that society changes and thus the way society memorializes things should change: "A society's collective memory is... by no means permanent and always subject to subtle and not to subtle reconstruction." [3] Given that society's memory can change, history can change, therefore ideas about how best to represent memory should be open to change. Pašović's installation works with different mediums and is the product of societal influence. Instead of using concrete, brick, paint, etc., Pašović creates his memorial with objects and sounds, his palette a street. Red plastic chairs, ordinary items, nothing glorified or ostentatious, but rather unadorned and unassuming. The music did not consist of dramatic overtures with thundering crescendos, but rather it drew from traditional and modern styles to create a blended sound that would truly honor those who have lost their lives.

Given Pašović's openness to experimentation, Huyssen would consider him and his work quite successful as Pašović pushed boundaries and embraced a novel way to commemorate people. Huyssen explains that sometimes, traditional museums, monuments, etc. are not enough to fully commemorate a moment or event: "Such multiple fracturing of the memory of the Holocaust in different countries and the multilayered sedimentation of images and discourses... has to be seen in its politically and culturally enabling aspects as a potential antidote to the freezing of memory into one traumatic image." [3]. The purpose of a memorial is not only to prevent forgetting, but also to keep the memory from being polarized. *The Sarajevo Red Line*, completely temporary, relies not necessarily on technology, but on various means of expression. It deviates from the typical monument form of concrete physicality.

Time and again, Pašović reiterated how necessary it was for Sarajevo's citizens to stop and make time in their lives to remember what happened in their city. James E. Young emphasized the various factors influencing a monument's development, including a nation's (and artist's) need: "each (memorial) reflects both the past experiences and the current lives of their communities, as well as the state's memory of itself. Each also reflects the temper of the memory artists' time, their place in contemporary aesthetic discourse, their media and materials." [4]. Pašović noted that Sarajevo had never given a tribute to all of the victims at the same time. With 20 years passing since the start of the siege, he decided it was time for Sarajevo to experience a massive commemoration, that in order to start healing, it first had to acknowledge those it had lost. The sheer magnitude of the installation elicited a profound sense of awe from onlookers, just as Pašović had intended. *The Sarajevo Red Line* was not something to be taken in lightly; it was meant to move a person, to stir something deep inside, to force a confrontation between history and present.

In the process of fashioning the *Sarajevo Red Line*, Pašović constantly kept the victims and their trauma in mind, something the memorial itself prompts its audience to do. James E. Young encourages the viewer to search for motives and answers to unasked questions: "we examine the process by which public memory of the Holocaust is constructed. We ask who creates this memory, under what circumstances, and for which audience? Which events are remembered, which forgotten, and how are they explained?" [4]. Who would be sitting in the chairs? Why are they not there now? How do we let them know they are not forgotten? Who is missing that I used to know? Sarajevo suffered greatly during the years of the war and it struggles to move forward today. The old adage "if you do not learn from your past, you are destined to repeat it," begs attention, but perhaps with different phrasing: "if you do not learn from your past, you cannot move onto your future." Bosnia is a country in the rebuilding itself from the ashes and in the haste of trying to move toward unity and peace, it can be easy to move away from the past. Pašović wants the past to remain with Bosnia to help her grow and move on from the pain and suffering. If wounds are not tended to, they cannot heal properly. Pašović knew his city was hurting and would be hurting on the anniversary of the siege's commencement, but instead of turning a blind eye to the tragedy, he welcomed the memory of it as a means to acknowledge those lost and show the strength and beauty of the city.

3. Conclusion

Sarajevans and Bosnians are not the only audience for Pašović's masterpiece. Trauma art holds a mysterious power over people; it draws them in, inspires them to want to know more about those who suffered. News outlets worldwide covered the *Sarajevo Red Line*, allowing the entire world to join with the Bosnians as they remembered their untimely dead. People with no connection to Bosnia besides hearing mention of it on a newscast could be taken in by the imagery of thousands of red chairs flowing like blood down a street. This same group of strangers was given the opportunity to step into the shoes of both victim and survivor, to see the world as a Bosnian might. Above all, Pašović creates the chance for people to empathize with those who lost so much. The ability to connect people is crucial to monuments.

Pašović created his magnum opus for the dead and for his city, but his message of honoring and remember transcends those immediately connected to it, to invite the world into Bosnia to explore and potentially feel her suffering.

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